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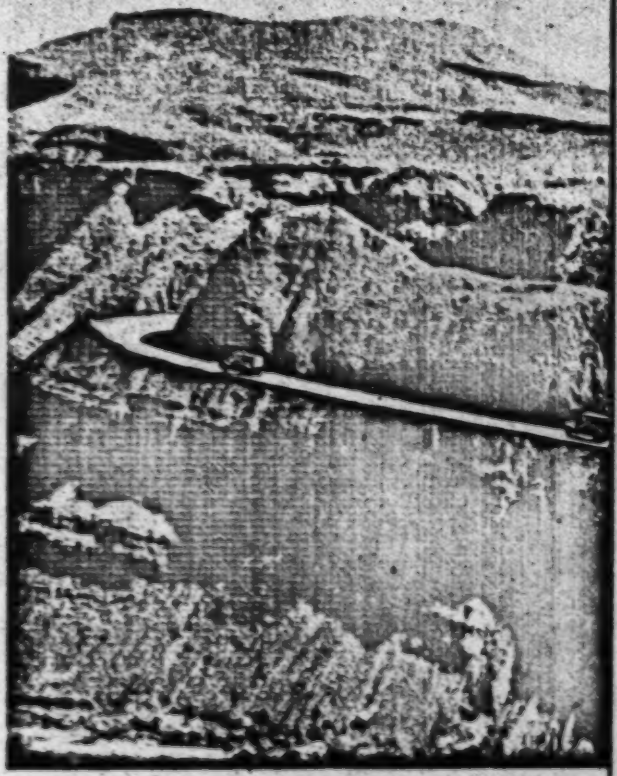

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THE KURDS OF IRAQ

C. J. Edmonds

I.

KURDISTAN is the country inhabited by the Kurds as a homogeneous community. It is divided between Turkey, Persia and Iraq with small overlaps into Syria and the Soviet Union, and its boundaries do not coincide with any international frontiers or internal administrative divisions.

Iraqi Kurdistan is bounded on the north and east by the Turkish and Persian frontiers, where the population on both sides is almost entirely Kurdish. On the south-west the internal ethnical boundary lies approximately along the railway from the Syrian frontier to Mosul city on the Tigris and thence a straight line to Mandali on the Persian frontier. The majority of the Kurds are thus concentrated in the four liwas[1] which in Ottoman times constituted the vilayet[1] of Mosul: Mosul (35% of the total population), Arbil (91%), Kirkuk (52%) and Sulaimani (100%). Kurds also have a majority in the two adjacent *qadhas*[2] of Khanaqin and Mandali. Other than the Kurds, there are villages of Chaldean Christians near Mosul city to the north and east, and about 10,000 Assyrians compactly settled in the highlands of the Amadiya region: there are also colonies of Turkomans in a string of towns, large and small, along the great highway leading from Mosul through Arbil, Altun Köprü, Kirkuk and Kifri towards Baghdad. On the other hand there are islands of Kurds outside these limits, the most interesting being the Jabal Sinjar, west of Mosul, where most of the inhabitants are Yazidis, the people often misleadingly described as devil worshippers.

The Kurdish population of Iraq can be estimated with a fair degree of accuracy, on the basis of the census of 1947, at about 900,000 or nearly one fifth of the total for the whole country. No statistics are available for Persian Kurdistan but a similar figure would be a reasonable guess. The Turkish census of 1945 gives the number of persons whose mother tongue was Kurdish as one and a half million; there is reason to think that the real number of Kurds is higher, perhaps two millions. The religion of the great majority of the Kurds in all three countries is Sunni Muslim; the mystical dervish orders have adherents in all parts of Kurdistan.

Of the larger towns Sulaimani is entirely and Arbil predominantly Kurdish. Smaller townships in which Kurds form the whole or the large

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1 [Territorial-administrative units, with vilayets sub-divided into liwas which are subdivided into qadhas.--Analyst]

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majority of the population are Khanaqin, Kifri, Koi Sanjaq, Ruwandiz, Aqra, Amadiya, Dohuk and Zakho. Kirkuk city is very mixed but contains a large Kurdish element. The professional and intellectual classes, as well as the larger land-owners, tend, as would be expected, to collect in the towns, and there is always a steady drift of these out of Kurdistan to Baghdad.

The rural element consists for the most part of settled villagers; the nomads, once numerous, now form only a small proportion of the whole. Though not all villagers are in fact tribesmen, the organization of society outside the towns may be said, for all practical purposes, still to be essentially tribal, with groups of villages owing a kind of feudal allegiance to a landlord, a Shaykh of one of the dervish fraternities, or a tribal Agha who may have imposed himself on the village by force. With the progressive consolidation of the authority of the administration, and with the spread of education, the villagers have not unnaturally begun to refuse to submit to the impositions, sanctioned by ancient custom perhaps but not enforceable at law, by which these barons, especially the Aghas having no title to the land, were accustomed to maintain their position. In many parts of the country the old social organization is breaking down.

II.

The south-western boundary of Iraqi Kurdistan runs for most of its length across the plain. But immediately to the north-east of the line the ground begins to rise, first as a maze of foothills, and then in a series of long, parallel, limestone ridges running from south-east to north-west, each loftier than the last, up to the main chain of Zagros, which over much of its length marks the Persian frontier. In the extreme north-west these ranges merge into the eastern extension of the Taurus system. On the Persian frontier there are many peaks of over 10,000 feet. It follows that there is a great variety of climatic conditions. The country is traversed by three important affluents of the Tigris, the Great Zab from Turkey, and the Little Zab and the Sirwan (Diyala) from Persia.

A railway from Baghdad following closely the line of the old high road through Kifri and Kikruk to Arbil serves Kurdistan south of the Great Zab; the main line up the right bank of the Tigris links Mosul directly with Baghdad and, as already mentioned, skirts the Kurdish districts of the extreme north-west. Most of the market towns are now accessible by automobile. Transportation in the remoter highlands and between villages is by mule and donkey; oxen are still used by the nomads as beasts of burden.

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The economy of Kurdistan is primarily pastoral and agricultural. The nomads in particular are rich in sheep and goats, and their wool, goat-hair and dairy produce are always in demand. Rough carpets and cloth for the national costume are woven both by the nomads and in the villages. The principal winter crops are wheat and barley; wheat from the Arbil plain and the Mosul district is reputed to be the best in the whole country and commands a high price; in most years there is an exportable surplus, but there is always a danger of drought and famine. In summer wherever there is water the villagers persist in growing rice for their own needs in spite of official discouragement and the grave prejudice to health from malaria which is directly traceable to it. Minor irrigated summer crops are maize, millet and lentils. The most valuable money crop is tobacco, of which enough (9,000 tons in 1954) is produced for the needs of the whole country, and to spare. Other local products are walnuts, oak-galls, gum tragacanth, and sumac. Timber for building is floated down the major rivers, and, on the Little Zab in particular, rafts of inflated skins called *kalak* still carry grain and other north-country produce more cheaply than other forms of transport. Recent introductions to Kurdistan which are doing well are cotton and sugarbeets. Baghdad is almost exclusively the market for all these commodities. Raisins and dried mulberries from the highlands are generally taken to some nearer point in the plains to be bartered for wheat and barley.

Apart from the great oil industry which has grown up round Kirkuk since the first gusher was struck nearby in October 1927, there has so far been little industrial development. But many Kurds have been trained by the Iraq Petroleum Company in various branches of engineering, and large technical and industrial training colleges established or projected at Mosul and Kirkuk are well placed to attract Kurdish students. Private enterprise may thus be expected to supplement in due course an ambitious governmental programme.

This programme has been made possible by the enhanced and steadily increasing oil royalties which have accrued to the government since 1952 ($250 millions in 1955) and from which the northern *liwas*, like the rest of the country, have already derived great benefit: foreign experts have been engaged to advise on improved methods of cultivating and processing tobacco; a second experimental farm has been started near Sulaimani; artesian wells are being brought in for stock watering and for irrigation where suitable; old roads are being remetalled and new roads opened up; rivers and streams are being bridged; municipal housing, electricity and water schemes are being subsidized; particular attention is being paid to schools and hospitals; a cement factory is nearing completion near Sulaimani; a power station with an initial capacity of 60,000 Kw. (and an ul-

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timate capacity of 150,000 Kw.) is to be completed in 1958 at Dibis on the Little Zab to serve all northern Iraq.

Two of the most widely advertized major projects of the development programme, the great dams at Dukan on the Little Zab and Darband-i Khan on the Sirwan, are located in Kurdistan and are bringing some temporary benefit to the neighbourhood in the form of wages for labour. But their purpose is first and foremost the protection of Baghdad from flood, and the secondary benefits from storage of water will accrue to the lands down stream. Up stream considerable areas of agricultural land will be submerged and many villages are doomed to destruction. The government is understood to be fully alive to the necessity of tackling the delicate problem of compensating and finding new land for the dispossessed cultivators with foresight and generosity, and of balancing these large spectacular works with lesser projects in the upland valleys which will be of more direct and permanent value to the local people. Failure in this regard might well lead to unrest.

III.

The Kurds have not remained unaffected by the rising tide of nationalism that has swept over the countries of the Middle East since the turn of the century; and to understand the attitude of the Kurds of Iraq to the central government of Baghdad we must cast a brief glance backwards over the history of the region both before and after 1918.

In spite of the centralizing policies of the Ottoman and Persian governments a number of quasi-autonomous Kurdish principalities survived in both countries until about the middle of the 19th century. Two of the princely families are intimately connected with the development of Kurdish nationalism: the Badr Khans of Bohtan (still in Turkey) with their capital at Jazirat ibn Umar (now Cizre), and the Babans of Sulaimani. It is not easy to fix on any particular date or circumstance as marking the beginning, or even a turning point, in the development of Kurdish nationalism in the modern sense. Throughout the 19th century, both before and after the suppression of the principalities, there were of course frequent revolts against the central authority in which the leaders did not fail to appeal to racial sentiment in order to rally their followers. Modern nationalism, unlike earlier manifestations of a similar spirit, tend to attach tremendous importance to language. It would be tempting then to suggest that some particular significance attached to the year 1892, when members of the Badr Khan family began the publication of a newspaper called *Kurdistan*, numbers of which appeared at intervals until 1902 in towns as far apart as Cairo, London and (of all unlikely places) Folkestone, England. But in 1892 Hajji Qadir of Koi (*circa* 1817-1894),

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whose patriotic poems in Kurdish are still recited with approval, was already seventy-five years old and thus formed an unbroken literary link with the days when the Baban principality was, in the words of another poet, 'neither subject to the Persians, nor slave-driven by the House of Osman.'

The first Kurdish political club was founded at Constantinople in 1908 by Amin Ali Badr Khan and General Sharif Pasha of Sulaimani. There was a revival of literary activity during the brief honeymoon after the Young Turk revolution of 1909, when periodicals, anthologies and the like were published at Constantinople in both the northern dialect of Bohtan and the southern dialect of Sulaimani. The preeminence in the south of the language of Sulaimani, which has since established itself as the standard vehicle of literary expression not only in Iraq but also on the Persian side of the frontier, is probably due in part to the patronage extended to letters by the later Baban princes, and in part to the foundation at Sulaimani by the Turks of a military school, cadets from which went on to the academy and staff-college at Constantinople, and so reached a level of education denied to other Kurds;[1] these same officers naturally supplied the intellectual element indispensable for a nationalist movement.

A fresh fillip was given to Kurdish aspirations by the military defeat of Turkey in 1918, and by point 12 of President Woodrow Wilson's 'programme of the world's peace' enunciated in January of that year, which stipulated that the non-Turkish nationalities of the Ottoman Empire should be 'assured of an absolute unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.' Sharif Pasha headed a Kurdish delegation to the Peace Conference in Paris and secured the insertion in the Treaty of Sèvres (10 August, 1920) of provision for the creation in the north-eastern vilayets of Turkey of an independent Kurdistan which the Kurds of Mosul vilayet would have the right to join.

IV.

When the armistice between the Allies and Turkey was signed at Mudros on 30 October, 1918, the British forces pursuing the defeated enemy up the Tigris were about 40 miles south of Mosul city; they were also in occupation of the line of little towns on the high road between Kifri and Altun Köprü. The Turkish troops were required to be clear of the whole of the Mosul vilayet within a fortnight. British policy, dictated by military considerations but nevertheless in full accord with

[1] It was at Sulaimani in 1918 that Kurdish was first made the official language of the administration; a consequence of this was that a large proportion of the officials in the other Kurdish districts later on were Sulaimani men.

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the idealistic spirit of the time, was at first to avoid commitments in the hills by setting up one or more semi-autonomous Kurdish provinces, to be loosely attached to whatever regular administration might eventually be established in the plains. Even before the armistice contact had been established with a certain Shaykh Mahmud, head of the leading Sayyid family of Southern Kurdistan, who was informed that any Kurdish groups or tribes in the three *liwa*s of Sulaimani, Kirkuk and Arbil which might wish to accept his leadership would be allowed to do so. It soon became evident, however, that the Saykh had overestimated his popularity, and his province was eventually restricted to little more than the *liwa* of Sulaimani. No similar initiative was taken in regard to the Kurdish districts in the *liwa* of Mosul, where there was no articulate Kurdish opinion.

This first experiment in Kurdish autonomy under modern conditions was not a success. Within six months the Shaykh, resenting the limitations placed on his freedom to do exactly as he liked, rebelled. After a short military operation he was captured and deported, and the *liwa* was brought under the direct administration of the Occupation Authority. But quite apart from Shaykh Mahmud's personal ambitions there was always present at Sulaimani, among all classes of the population, an abiding conviction, rooted in their history, that the place contained the germs of a revived and extensive Kurdish state of which it was the predordained capital. The belief had little justification either in its physical appearance and commercial importance or in the academic attainments and political experience of its citizens, but it was always in the air. The proposal that Sulaimani with the adjacent districts should once more become an autonomous territory, therefore, had not come to the people as anything strange.

For the other political leaders the fall of Mahmud was thus no reason for renouncing the glittering prize brought so near by the Treaty of Sèvres. Assurances had been given in the British Parliament that the Kurds would not be forced to come under an Arab government against their will, and when the Provisional National Government of Iraq was formed in November, 1920, Sulaimani remained under the direct control of the British High Commissioner. Kirkuk (which then included Arbil) did accept a *Mutasarrif* (Governor) nominated by the new government, but he, like all the other officials, was a local man, and Turkish, the language of the educated urban classes (but not of the majority of the inhabitants), continued to be used for official purposes. When in June, 1921, the Amir Faysal arrived in Iraq as the candidate sponsored by the British Government for the throne Sulaimani refused to participate in the referendum; Kirkuk did participate but accounted for most of the

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175 negative votes cast. No representative from either *liwa* attended the
668 accession ceremonies.

648 A difficult situation had been further complicated by the promulgation in January, 1920, by the Turkish Cabinet of a manifesto known as the 'National Pact' which, while conceding the right to self-determination of the Arabs south of the armistice line of 1918, refused to contemplate the surrender of the Mosul vilayet. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed by the representatives of the Sultan nine months later, was never ratified. For the next five years the Kurds were subjected to a campaign of intensive propaganda from Turkey: threats of invasion, clandestine correspondence with urban and tribal leaders, open incitements to rebellion, warnings to 'traitors,' and pervading all, the religious appeal for loyalty to the Sultan-Caliph (until the Caliphate was abolished in March 1924). Small bodies of uniformed Turkish troops actually crossed the border at various points in support of the restless tribes. The administrative boundary in Arbil and parts of Mosul was withdrawn to the edge of the plains, and in September, 1922, the whole of Sulaimani was evacuated. Shaykh Mahmud was brought back in return for an undertaking that he would secure the expulsion of the Turks from the *liwa* and that he would refrain from interfering in the neighbouring *liwas* of Kirkuk and Arbil. But in the intoxicating mountain air these promises were soon forgotten:
[669] in November the Shaykh proclaimed himself 'King of Kurdistan,' claimed the whole country down to the Jabal Hamrin as part of his 'Kingdom,' and so far from expelling the Turks sought to use their presence as a lever to press his ambitions. In December the British and Iraqi governments, hoping to rally the more moderate Kurds to resist the aggressor, made a joint communication to certain friendly leaders recognizing 'the right of the Kurds of Iraq to set up a Kurdish government' which should send responsible delegates as soon as possible to discuss boundaries and political and economic relations; but there was nobody capable of taking advantage of the offer, which lapsed.[2]

The prevailing uncertainty and unrest were actually aggravated by the signature at Lausanne in July, 1923, of a Treaty of Peace between the Allies and Turkey, for it specifically excluded the Mosul question from the settlement. In August, 1924, the dispute was referred to the League of Nations. A Commission was sent to examine the problem on the spot, and, in December, 1925, the Council awarded the vilayet to Iraq subject to guarantees that regard would be paid to the 'desires expressed by the Kurds that officials of Kurdish race should be appointed

[2] The activities of Shaykh Mahmud necessitated a series of air and military operations in the years that followed; Sulaimani town itself was reoccupied by the Iraqi Army in July, 1924; but the Shaykh continued to harry the administration until June, 1927, when he submitted. He took up arms again in 1930 in sympathy with the imprisoned intellectuals (see below) but gave himself up in 1932.

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for the administration of their country, the dispensation of justice and teaching in the schools, and that Kurdish should be the language of all these services.' The Turkish government at first refused to accept the decision but, by a tripartite treaty between the United Kingdom, Iraq and Turkey signed at Ankara in June, 1926, finally renounced its sovereignty over the Mosul vilayet. The administration of the three *liwas* was then assimilated to that of the rest of Iraq except in the matter of the official language and the race of the officials.

The Turkish menace was hardly out of the way when the approach of the end of the Mandate for Iraq roused misgivings among the leaders of Kurdish opinion as to the value of the guarantees. Petitions to the League were treated as treason, and in 1930 and 1931 many highly respected Kurdish intellectuals were imprisoned. When the application of Iraq for admission to the League came up for consideration in 1932 the Council required and received from the Iraqi government a written Declaration, which was to rank as part of the Constitution, reaffirming its undertakings in regard to the minorities. A special law was enacted defining the areas within which Kurdish and Turkish should be the languages of the local administration, of the law courts, and of primary education.

For the next few years there was little manifestation of political nationalism in Iraq. The hard logic of facts seemed to have persuaded the leaders, some sooner, some later, that their hopes were impossible of realization; most of them settled down quietly, salving their patriotic consciences, perhaps, with the vague idea that one day another world cataclysm might give their sons or grandsons their opportunity and that in the meantime any agitation would do more harm than good.

During the year preceding the outbreak of the Second World War there were indications that the German Legation in Baghdad was spreading propaganda, especially among young men of the official classes, that the Kurds had been grossly betrayed by Britain at the end of the last war but that a victorious Germany was ready to create an independent Kurdistan after the next. But after the actual outbreak of hostilities the elder realists remained convinced that neither side was likely to alienate the Arabs for a small and internationally unimportant people like the Kurds, and preferred to take no initiative. In the spring of 1941, when Rashid 'Ali staged his *coup d'état* against the Regent and the lawful government of Iraq, Shaykh Mahmud escaped from Baghdad, where he had been living in honourable exile, and did indeed obtain some support from the younger generation and among the tribes for the idea of a revolt based on the belief that, 'the unreliability of the Arabs' having now become manifest, the Allies would no longer hesitate to give the Kurds

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their 'rights'; but with the restoration of the Regent, a staunch friend of the Allies, the movement, such as it was, lost all momentum.

V.

'Do as you would be done by' is not a maxim that seems to have appealed very much to the various formerly subject peoples, in Europe or in Asia, who have been liberated since 1918, and it was hardly to be expected that the Arabs of Iraq would prove an exception. Even in Ottoman times the three vilayets had been considered as constituting a single unit, Turkish Arabia in British official parlance, and any scheme of partition on racial lines to meet the aspirations of a minority was as unpalatable as similar ideas have been to majorities elsewhere. Against any suggestion that the central government should make a special effort to conciliate the Kurds by recognizing their existence *qua* Kurds and not merely as individuals enjoying the ordinary civil liberties like anybody else, it was at first argued that since the greater part of Kurdistan lay outside Iraq any concession in this direction could only encourage the separatist tendencies of the Kurds of Iraq and that it would lead to demands for similar privileges from other racial or religious groups.

On the Kurdish side, quite apart from the initial unwillingness to accept subordination to the Arabs who had been a subject race like themselves, it was felt that the guarantees given to the League in 1925 and again in 1932 were being either ignored or at any rate grudgingly implemented. Statistics could be adduced to show that the Kurdish districts were not getting their fair share of the social services or development projects. Particularly bitter were complaints that the schools were inadequate in both quality and number, that failure to prepare and distribute school-books in Kurdish was making a mockery of the promises regarding the language instruction, and that Kurdish students were not being accepted for institutions of higher education or educational missions abroad. The big-spending Department of Irrigation was not represented in the north at all. In the sphere of Public Works there were complaints that all the emphasis was on police posts, and it was indeed the fact that even the construction of roads was for some years held back by the defeatist strategy of a Ministry of Defence which regarded them as facilities for an invader rather than a means of consolidating the administration and benefiting the population. The claim, made at the League of Nations and elsewhere, that the Kurds were always adequately represented in the Cabinet was denounced as disingenuous, since the Ministers in question, even if they could claim remote Kurdish origin, generally belonged to families long expatriated and were Arab rather than Kurdish in sentiment.

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Insofar as these grievances had some foundation in fact enough has already been said to show that the prevailing state of affairs was due, in part at any rate, to political circumstances beyond the control of the government, and in part to the restlessness of the Kurds themselves which for long periods had brought the administration in a large part of Kurdistan to a standstill. Some of the neglect, too, was undoubtedly due not to malice but to a tendency, not unknown elsewhere, for the higher authorities to take more thought for the parts of the country near the center than for the distant outposts.

However that may be, the result was that just when the earlier agitators were developing into elder statesmen who, sobered by experience, no longer regarded separation as feasible or desirable there was growing up a new generation nurtured on a sense of grievance and frustration. Resentment was further embittered by insulting references to the minorities not infrequently made by pan-Arab orators in moments of fanatical exaltation. In all the countries of the Middle East the western Powers are regarded as the supporters of the old reactionary Beys and Pashas who have retained most of the political power in their own hands (the charge is unfair but it would prolong this paper unduly to examine it here). It is only to be expected, then, that disgruntled youth (and especially young Kurds with a racial added to a social grievance) should look to Russia for its inspiration. The Russians have long been the neighbours of the Kurds through the Caucasian provinces, and, as we have seen, a small part of Kurdistan lies within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. Even before 1918 Kurdish malcontents in Turkey and Persia were accustomed to seek support from the Russians. For the Russians exploitation of Kurdish unrest would be nothing new, indeed something of the kind has been seen comparatively recently at the time of the short-lived 'Kurdish Republic' of Mahabad in Persian Kurdistan, and again in 1947 when Mulla Mustafa of Barzan, a fugitive rebel from Iraq, was welcomed in Soviet Armenia, given high military rank, and encouraged to broadcast in Kurdish from Erivan.

But with every year that passes any concerted armed revolt becomes more improbable. The mercantile classes, realizing as they do that economically the Kurdish north is bound hand and foot to Baghdad, have never shown any enthusiasm for anything but the mildest form of nationalism, and the programme of development now in hand must have the effect of binding the whole country together more closely than ever before. The old loyalties to religious Shaykhs and tribal Aghas have been too deeply undermined for any self-appointed leader to command a serious measure of support in any violent adventure. The complexity of modern weapons has given the government an overwhelming advantage

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over tribesmen armed only with rifles and limited supplies of ammunition, and, with the advent of aircraft and new types of mechanical transport suitable for rough country, even their former advantage of superior mobility has passed to the forces of law and order. In any case, those of the old stormy petrels who are still alive have been softened by a growing dependence on the amenities of the towns and on modern luxuries brought within reach by improved communications, while their sons, most of whom have been educated in government schools, are tending to become dependent, like the rest of the new middle class, on regular employment in the army, the civil service, or the professions. Nationalistic agitation might perhaps seek to profit from any agrarian unrest, but apart from this it is likely to express itself in little more than the clandestine circulation of leaflets by societies calling themselves 'communist' or occasional localized riots by students and bazaar loafers.

Whatever the mistakes and short-comings of the past, Iraq is the one country where the existence of the Kurds as such has come to be officially recognized. In Sulaimani and Arbil especially not only is Kurdish the official language but the whole atmosphere of the administration is Kurdish. The sense of being at the mercy of an uncomprehending bureaucracy in a distant capital has been mitigated by a recent measure of devolution applying to the whole country, the Provincial Administration Law, whereby funds are placed at the disposal of, or may be raised by, the local authorities to be spent in accordance with policies locally determined. In spite of earlier handicaps Kurds have risen to the highest offices. One of the intellectuals imprisoned in 1931 has since held the portfolio of Education, and all the necessary books for the primary classes are now available in good, idiomatic Kurdish. A son of Shaykh Mahmud and one of the Shaykh's principal lieutenants, an officer of great ability, have been Minister of Social Affairs in different Cabinets. For two or three years past the Minister of the Interior (a key office, second only to that of Prime Minister) and the *Mutasarrif* of Mosul (the senior provincial governorship) have been Kurds born and bred in Sulaimani. Fair numbers of students are now being sent to Europe and America. If there was ever any justification for the old fear that the Kurds of Iraq would look north or east for their salvation, there can be very little in it now. The present Prime Minister, General Nuri al-Sa'id, has a comprehending and liberal approach to the Kurdish question. It is still too early to say that all the old wounds have been healed, but there seems to be a new spirit abroad that augurs well for the future.